



To: Urban Design Committee
From: Planning and Preservation Division
Date: December 5, 2019
RE: **Conceptual location, character, and extent review of Brown's Island Improvement Plan; 1 Brown's Island; UDC 2019-29**

I. APPLICANT

Mark Olinger, City of Richmond Planning and Development Review

II. LOCATION

1 Brown's Island

Property Owner:

City of Richmond

III. PURPOSE

The application is for the conceptual location, character, and extent review of the Brown's Island Improvement Plan.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The purpose of the Brown's Island Improvement Plan is to highlight potential improvement projects for Brown's Island that can be championed by the City of Richmond, Venture Richmond, and others to help create an even better event and festival venue while also fully realizing the island's potential as an urban park.

Staff is supportive of the Brown's Island Improvement Plan, as it suggests potential projects and improvements that will make Brown's Island a more vibrant public space for events, festivals, and recreation.

The plan proposes many elements that are recommended by the City of Richmond's Urban Design Guidelines when considering public spaces and parks, including flexible seating options, increased public access to the Haxall Mill Canal and the James River, increased accommodations for events, landscaping, new structures, historic preservation, interpretation, and public art.

Therefore, it is Staff's position that the Urban Design Committee should recommend that the Planning Commission grant conceptual approval with the following conditions:

- Applicant provide a maintenance plan with the final submission for proposed projects that include landscaping, permanent structures, or play areas.

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V. FINDINGS OF FACT

a. Site Description and Surrounding Context

The project site is located at 1 Brown's island and is bordered by Tredegar Street and 10th Street to the North and West, the Manchester Bridge to the East, and

the James River to the South. The site is zoned DCC-Downtown Civic and Cultural.

Brown's island includes hardscape and open space for events, as well as walking paths, and landscaped areas along the canal and river.

Notable sites that surround the project area include: Historic Tredegar Iron Works to the North, T. Tyler Potterfield Memorial Bridge to the South, and the Richmond Canal Walk along the North Bank of the Haxall Mill Canal.

b. Scope of Review

This project is reviewed under Section 17.07 for location, character, and extent as a street, square, park, or other public way.

c. Project Description

The purpose of the Brown's Island Improvement Plan is to highlight potential improvement projects for Brown's Island that can be championed by the City of Richmond, Venture Richmond, and others to help make Brown's Island an even better event and festival venue while also fully realizing its potential as an urban park.

The first step in developing the plan was the Intangible Qualities Process on April 18, 2019, which included existing conditions documentation and historical research, a design charrette with riverfront stakeholders, and the formulation of broad guiding themes for Brown's Island, with some specific examples of how those themes could be applied in the design process. Much of the data and many concepts for this improvement plan have been pulled from Hargreaves & Associates' 2012 Richmond Riverfront Plan.

Next, Brown's Island was imagined into seven key areas highlighted in the Projects and Strategies chapter: Front Porch, The Clearing, The Point, Great Lawn, Back Porch, Haxall Gardens, and Sturgeon Cove. Each of these areas has a detailed spread in the document showing proposed projects, inspiration imagery, and precedent project information. Projects in each area range from small improvements and programming suggestions up to large and complex capital improvement projects. An over-arching goal of the plan is to increase visitor engagement by creating multiple new unique destinations and experiences on the island while also improving accessibility, visitor comfort, and event logistics.

As the main vehicular way adjacent to Brown's Island, Tredegar Street's design is important to the function of the island. While specific design proposals for Tredegar Street are out of the scope of this study, general suggestions for improving pedestrian connectivity and safety are included.

Improvements to this plan include creating spaces that allow for vendors and permanent/ semi-permanent structures such as restrooms and kiosks; flexible seating options that allow for leisure and access to the riverfront through terracing; improvement of existing landscaping to allow for recreation and education; new landscaping that utilizes native species and habitats; installation of new riverfront outlook areas for river viewing; way finding signage pedestrian

and bike infrastructure; public art; and the opportunity for interpretive displays that educate the public on the island's past.

Sturgeon Cove, an area off-island to the northwest, is included in the improvement plan as it is heavily used and needs to be thoughtfully considered. Proposed improvements in this area include a new shade structure; expansion and revitalization of existing garden; rebuilding of the existing boat launch; a new deck space at the river; terraces; and bike and pedestrian access improvements.

d. UDC Review History

At the January 2014 regular meeting, the UDC reviewed the conceptual location, character, and extent of the Brown's Island Dam Walk (UDC 2014-05), and recommended that the Planning Commission grant conceptual approval of the plan as submitted. The Planning Commission approved the conceptual design at their January 21st, 2014 meeting.

At the August 2014 regular meeting, the UDC reviewed the final location, character, and extent of the Brown's Island Dam Walk (T. Tyler Potterfield Memorial Bridge) (UDC 2014-05(2)), and recommended that the Planning Commission grant final approval of the plan as submitted. Planning Commission approved the plan as submitted at their September 15th, 2014 meeting.

At the January 2015 regular meeting, the UDC reviewed the final location, character, and extent of the fence and gate detail for the Brown's Island Way arch over the James River and Kanawha Canal (UDC 2015-02), and recommended that the Planning Commission Grant final approval of the plans as submitted. This item was taken to the Planning Commission in January 2015 and February 2015, and was withdrawn by the Applicant when it was rescheduled for the March 2nd, 2015 Planning Commission Meeting. The project was not brought back before the Planning Commission.

e. Master Plan

The City of Richmond's 2000 Master Plan proposes to continue to "develop the James River waterfront as a destination for residents and tourists while protecting water quality, scenic beauty, and environmentally sensitive areas." (pg.66). The Brown's Island Improvement Plan speaks to the beautification and further development of the island to allow for greater public enjoyment as a riverfront destination.

The Brown's Island Improvement Plan Speaks to the 2008 Downtown Plan by proposing the further development of Brown's Island as a well-connected public space that is suitable for recreation and festivals.

When discussing the Riverfront, the 2008 Downtown Plan suggests: "allow residents and visitors to fully enjoy this unique natural feature by creating a series of clear connections to the riverfront" and also states that "a key strategy for improving access to the James River is to create clear, pedestrian oriented connections between city parks and the riverfront" (pg. 1.15).

The 2008 Downtown Plan encourages promoting, "recreational activity along the river, such as waterfront festivals, kayaking and rowing" (pg. 3.15). The Brown's Island Improvement Plan proposes to create an island that is better suited for

festivals, and includes several amenities that allow the public to engage in recreational activities in the Haxall Mill Canal and James River.

Specifically, the 2008 Downtown Plan states that “more central, easily accessed, and traditionally developed portions of the riverfront, such as Brown’s Island, should continue to be promoted as places for programmed recreation, with waterfront festivals and concerts bringing activity to the waterfront” (pg. 3.15), and that Brown’s Island should be maintained, “as an outdoor festival venue.” The Plan also mentions the need to “improve connectivity” (pg. 4.45) on the Island.

The 2012 Downtown Riverfront Plan speaks to the continued development of Brown’s Island as a riverfront destination for festivals and recreation. Some of the strategies to improve the island that are mentioned in the Plan include the “use of non-motorized, personal recreational watercraft along the Haxall Mill Canal” the implementation of riverfront terraces that serve as seating, and a pathway to the river’s edge allowing for enhanced access and visibility to this natural amenity (pg. 32).

In addition, the Brown’s Island Improvement Plan generally speaks to the 2012 Downtown Riverfront Plan’s following strategies and proposals: “A new arrival plaza would extend from Tredegar Street across the adjustable dam span to the existing “3 Days in April 1865” installation. This new, permeable paver-clad plaza would expand into the lawn, allowing for a café and/ or concessions. A small restroom facility would be integrated into the structure, with café vendor responsible for maintenance and security. The existing heliport would be reconfigured as a children’s water play space. The gravel, back-of-house logistics lot beneath the Manchester Bridge is a critical connective passage to the Canal Walk, and yet it currently sends the visual cue that this is not a public space, nothing more than a back-of-house operation. Logistics and public passage can both be integrated, with permeable pavers transforming and expanding the pavement into an arrival plaza capable of accommodating turning tractor trailers. The existing shipping container storage strategy could be unified through a cohesive architectural intervention to make the storage more intentional and less haphazard, or replacement with a shed appropriate for a public space and dedicated to festival and event programming” (pg. 32).

f. Urban Design Guidelines

The Urban Design Guidelines state that “successful public parks, both small and large, active or passive, share certain qualities, which include the ability to attract and entertain visitors, access and connectivity to surrounding areas, and safety and comfort. Specific design will vary from park to park, but should respond to all of these general characteristics.” (pg. 9)

Regarding materials, lighting, and landscaping, the guidelines state: “A preference should be given toward materials and construction techniques which improve energy efficiency and water/soil quality. Lighting and landscaping should allow for surveillance and policing activities, but should be designed primarily to accommodate the intended use of the park” (page 9).

“Certain design considerations should be addressed in any project, regardless of the type of park. Historic elements should be surveyed and preservation should

be considered for both facilities and landscapes. Impacts to the natural landscape should be assessed and should generally be minimized when constructing man-made elements. A preference should be given toward materials and construction techniques which improve energy efficiency and water/soil quality. On-site signage should be consistent in style and convenient to visitors, but should be inconspicuously integrated into the overall landscape.” (pg.9)

In order to ensure the up-keep of public parks, the guidelines mention that, “all park projects should include a maintenance plan which addresses all phases of the project, including both landscaping and facilities.” (pg. 9)

The Urban Design Guidelines state that “the site should respond to its users through its design and by providing an appropriate array of amenities to serve those users. Circulation within the site should be geared toward pedestrian movements, not vehicular. Connectivity from the site to adjacent areas should be considered during the design phase” and that “plazas should provide a pleasant transitional environment for pedestrians” and incorporate “landscaping, public art, and historic preservation to create inviting spaces.” (pg. 14)

The Community Character section of the Urban Design Guidelines notes “site furnishings should be conveniently located for the pedestrian, but should not obstruct pedestrian circulation. Furnishings should be located where people congregate, such as at bus stops, in front of major attractions, and in parks and plazas. The placement of furnishings should not create visual clutter on the streetscape.” (pg. 20)

VII. ATTACHMENTS

- a. Vicinity Map**
- b. Application**
- c. Plans**